



NEWS RELEASE

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Software writer plays bagpipes

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MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE – GUNTER ANNEX, Ala. -- Onlookers stop and stare.

Is it the sentimental and stirring melody coming from a cowhide and reeds? Or is it the Scottish plaid kilt and knee-high socks? Either way it attracts listeners and gawkers.

"You can't really be a closet bagpiper."

After playing the bagpipes for 27 years, Charles Hightower is extremely used to the attention he gets when he practices and performs on his bagpipes.

"I'll usually practice in the house if I can get away with it," said Mr. Hightower, who's been married for 19 years, has three children and writes application software at Standard Systems Group. "It's so loud. I don't want to cause a divorce so I'll bend to their will."

For his practice backup plan Mr. Hightower will resort to piping in local parks, where he'll usually get an audience. However, he only wears the kilt during his public performances, which have compiled over the years into quite an impressive list.

The Scot has piped for one of the royal princes of Saudi Arabia, at the grand opening of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in front of then Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger, and for Chuck Yeager and other fighter aces during Gathering of Eagles at Air Command and Staff College and more. For several years he was a volunteer member of the Alabama State Trooper Honor Guard, piping in parades and trooper funerals.

Mr. Hightower became interested in the bagpipes after hearing some bagpipers at the Highland Games in Atlanta when he was just 13.

"I loved the way they sounded. It was an electric moment for me. I said 'I gotta learn to play that'," said Mr. Hightower, who had been previously and unsuccessfully forced to play the piano.

But rather than making an investment in a musical instrument, his parents made their own cheap version of the bagpipe chanter out of a wooden dowel with drilled holes.

"I became discouraged playing on a stick," said Mr. Hightower. He set aside his dream until he could convince his parents to invest in his piping future.

Several years later his parents approved and he started learning on the softer practice chanter, used by pipers to learn and improve fingering. After six intensive months he was ready to learn on the actual bagpipes.

"The first time I played it felt like I was blowing up an air mattress with a hole in it. I was dizzy and disoriented," said Mr. Hightower.

Eventually he built up his lungpower and was able to master the difficult fingerings and grace notes. And long with a stellar resume of performances, Mr. Hightower returned to the various highland games where he has won some bagpipe competitions.

Since it takes a great deal of practice time to remain competitive, Mr. Hightower was unable to compete when he and wife, Amy, started their family.

"Now that they're getting older and have pursuits of his own, I intend to resume competition next fall," said Mr. Hightower.

Along with his personal practice schedule, he is teaching nine students at Auburn University at Montgomery and is the Pipe Major of the Montgomery St. Andrews' Pipes and Drums.

"I really enjoy it," said Mr. Hightower. "It's just something that daddy does."

As a bagpiper people most often request to hear the popular "Amazing Grace" and "Scotland the Brave." But, even more frequently, people request him to tell them what he wears under the kilt...

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